Gharad Bryan, A. Mushfiq Mobarak, Karim Naguib, Maira Reimão, and Ashish Shenoy

IGC

International Growth Centre

Lessons learned from a scale-up of a seasonal migration RCT in Bangladesh

In brief

- When development programmes expand from small-scale evaluations to large-scale implementation, the increase in size requires new administration and management practices. Project administration can potentially limit the effectiveness of programmes at scale even if there are few changes in implementation and delivery of service.

- In 2017, in partnership with Evidence Action, the authors set out to test the "at scale" effects of an intervention offering seasonal migration subsidies to over 150,000 poor households in rural northern Bangladesh. Previous iterations of the intervention had demonstrated significant success at smaller scales.

- However, the scale-up of the study in 2017 failed to generate a meaningful effect on seasonal migration. This lack of replication may have been caused by various administrative changes in the programme.

- The authors make three policy recommendations to improve future scale-ups of such studies.

Ideas for growth

www.theigc.org

Overview: Seasonal migration at scale

A primary goal of experimental research in development economics is to design, test, and encourage the implementation of policies to improve the lives of the poor. Randomised evaluations of pilot programmes aim to test the effectiveness of promising ideas in this area. Our continuing work on seasonal migration focuses on the next step: evaluating whether an intervention that has demonstrated benefits in piloting continues to be viable and impactful at scale. In this policy brief, we discuss our experience early in this process, focusing on administrative decisions that may detract from a programme's effectiveness. This concern is distinct from common criticisms regarding external validity and general equilibrium effects that arise during programme expansion.

In 2017, we tested the effects of a large-scale intervention providing seasonal migration subsidies to poor households in rural northern Bangladesh. This intervention was first introduced in 2008 through a pilot experiment offering transfers to 1,292 households across 68 villages. In the pilot, a migration subsidy of USD 8.50 increased seasonal migration by 22 percentage points over its baseline prevalence of around one-third. Households that took advantage of the subsidy increased expenditures by 30% and caloric intake by 500 calories per person per day during the lean season. Three years later, households that had been offered the one-time subsidy still migrated at higher rates than the control group, who had never received a subsidy[1].

Following the success of the pilot and subsequent evaluations, the initiative was taken up by Evidence Action, an NGO committed to testing and scaling up programmes that have been found to be cost effective based on rigorous empirical research and have the potential to benefit the millions of poor people. Through Evidence Action's "No Lean Season" programme, in each year from 2017 to 2019 over 150,000 poor households in the Rangpur region of Bangladesh will be offered a subsidy for seasonal migration. The move from pilot to a scaled-up programme comes with implementation challenges and new administrative demands, and, throughout the process, we have provided support to Evidence Action to ensure that the programme is scaled in a way that allows for continued evaluation while meeting the logistical needs of scaling up. In this brief, we describe our experience and lessons learned from the first year of scale-up.

Recent results

In the 2017 scale-up round, we do not observe an effect from No Lean Season subsidies on seasonal migration – in contrast to previous, smaller-scale rounds. In the first round of the scaled-up intervention, when subsidies were offered to 150,000 households (treated group), their migration rates were not statistically different from those in the control group.

---

1. See https://www.evidenceaction.org/intro-no-lean-season/ for more details.

Unsurprisingly, the programme also did not improve secondary outcomes such as consumption expenditure, caloric intake, and income. Through follow-up surveys, we discovered a possible cause of the failure to replicate: seemingly innocuous standard administrative practices may lead to loans not reaching their intended target group.

Every year, one-third of households in rural Rangpur send a migrant, regardless of whether they receive a subsidy or not. These are the "regular migrants", although exactly who is in this group may differ from year to year. Our intervention – seasonal migration subsidies – works by removing a constraint on households that want to send a migrant but cannot finance the cost up front. Through previous rounds of studies, we estimate that around 22% of the population will shift its behavior from non-migrant to migrant when given the subsidy. These are the "induced migrants", who only migrate when encouraged to do so by the subsidy and cannot afford to otherwise[2]. In practice, it is impossible to distinguish induced migrants from regular migrants, so loans are distributed to any migrant who requests one.

Microfinance organisations commonly manage large volumes of loans by setting disbursement targets for loan officers. Targets are easily measured, provide clear goals for employees, and serve as a straightforward metric for managers to evaluate performance. In the 2017 No Lean Season, we anticipated covering an area consisting of 72,000 eligible households, which led the implementation team to set a target of around 40,000 loan disbursements. This figure represents 56% of the eligible population, enough to cover both regular and induced migrants (roughly, one-third plus 22%). However, the efficiency of the officers on the ground had been substantially underestimated, and by the end of the targeting phase the team had identified 150,000 eligible households, or over twice as many as originally projected. Because of local regulations, the disbursement target remained the same, at 40,000, but now represented only 27% of the eligible population.

This relatively lower target may have led to directing loans primarily to regular migrants instead of induced migrants. From the perspective of an officer who is given a target, it is easiest to meet it by finding regular migrants, as they already plan on migrating and are more eager to take out the subsidy. Finding households that do not plan to send a migrant but would change their behaviour if they received a loan is harder and requires more effort. And even if officers do not set out to find the easiest cases, regular migrants may also demand loans earlier than induced migrants because the latter group needs time to plan and make arrangements before deciding to migrate. With an inappropriately low target, implementers may meet the target with regular migrants and scale back efforts before reaching induced migrants.

---

2. These groups correspond to "always-takers" and "compliers", respectively, in the parlance of programme evaluation.

The data from our research and a follow up survey of officers are consistent with the theory that, in 2017, migration subsidies were primarily disbursed to regular migrants. Although we cannot determine whether an individual is a regular migration or potential induced migrant, past migration is a strong predictor of migration plans. The population receiving loans in 2017 contains a disproportionately high fraction of prior migrants, a fact not observed in previous small-scale rounds. It is important to note that our research design was not intended to study these implementation choices, so we have no experimental evidence and cannot rule out alternative explanations for the lack of effect, such as the role of flooding or of recent economic development in the region. However, the possibility of mis-targeting is sufficiently general that it may arise at scale for a wide variety of policies in many different contexts.

Many programmes rely on intermediate policies aimed to facilitate or induce a desired behaviour; examples include conditional cash transfers, directed loans, and agricultural extension. The impact of these programmes all rely on reaching a sizeable subset of people who respond positively and change their behavior through the intervention. At the same time, measurements used for internal programme monitoring may be insufficient proxies for programme success precisely because they do not (and often cannot) identify and apply metrics to households that are not in the programme or who shift behavior only in response to the programme. This issue is especially acute if there is a high baseline prevalence of the target behaviour (in our case, seasonal migration; but for other programs, school attendance, hospital use, etc.). Targets that are set too low, even if for administrative reasons, can lead to the use of resources primarily on those who already comply with the program, rather than changing the behaviour of those who might benefit the most.

Policy recommendations

- **Clearly communicate how programmes are intended to function.**

    When handing off programmes for scale-up, it is important for researchers to clearly communicate the programme's theory with implementing partners. Such instructions can be complex (e.g. "induced migrants" requires references to an unobservable counterfactual migration status) and researchers should select partners who are receptive to sophisticated goals.

- **Gather enough baseline information to accurately set expectations.**

    When targets are used to evaluate performance, it is important to set accurate expectations about the desired reach or take-up. This can be especially tricky when scale-ups include new populations or new areas where baseline behavior may differ from that observed in piloting.

- **Monitor effectiveness by measuring outcomes rather than implementation targets**

  Programme implementation metrics, such as number of loans disbursed, are intermediate measures that may not accurately reflect programme outcomes. Whenever possible, it is valuable to gather data on desired programme outcomes for accurate evaluation.